

Ex-Soviet's Escape Into a Childhood Dream

By Kevin Kloee
Washington Post Staff Writer

CHICAGO

One June day in 1983, Red Army Sgt. Mykola Movchan walked away from his grenadier unit in Afghanistan in search of a new life in a free country.

In the 2½ years since, he says he has never looked back. The soft-spoken former Soviet conscript has settled with increasing ease into a life of his own making, precisely what he was seeking. And while not sure "exactly where I will go," Movchan says he is "satisfied enough for now."

The outlines of his quiet existence are almost indistinguishable from the lives of many 22-year-olds at the threshold of American adulthood. He has an apartment in New Jersey, a job in New York City, friends who let him drive their cars now that he has his brand-new license. He enjoys watching wrestling on television and visited Madison Square Garden for a live taste of it recently, although he found the fans' fanaticism a bit overwhelming.

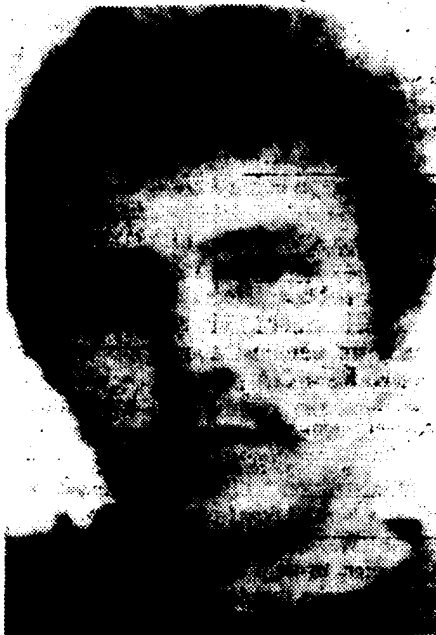
He finds opera and ballet beyond comprehension and, like many of his countrymen, has trouble making sense of American newspapers. "I read them, but truly, I don't understand them," he said in Russian, with a smile that spoke reams.

He likes to cook at home and, if pressed for time, does what many Americans do: He heads for a Big Mac.

He may buy a car someday but finds the profusion of choices confusing, just as the rest of us do. "In the Soviet Union," he recalled with a laugh, "there are only a few basic models: Volga, Zhiguli, Moskvich, Zaporozhets."

But the details of his existence mark him as an unusual and especially interesting figure amid the controversy and concern about defectors such as KGB agent Vitaly Yurchenko, who chose to return to the Soviet Union last week, and would-be defectors such as Ukrainian sailor Miroslav Medvid.

U.S. officials believe that Medvid jumped from the Soviet grain freighter Marshal Konev last month near New Orleans and was seeking asylum when he was returned by the Immigration and Naturalization Service; Soviet officials say he fell into the Mississippi River while making repairs on the ship. Like many former Soviet citizens and Ukrainians in this country, Movchan said he



MYKOLA MOVCHAN

... "It would be a nightmare to go back."

has no doubt that Medvid was trying to defect.

"It would be a nightmare to go back," Movchan said, applying the idea to himself and the sailor. "Miroslav Medvid was very unlucky. There is no telling what will happen to him when he is returned to the Soviet Union. I can't say exactly what will happen to him, but it could be a long jail sentence, exile in Siberia... perhaps put him in a psychiatric hospital... They could shoot him... whatever."

As for Yurchenko, Movchan said, "I'm not able to judge his case. I'm not familiar with his story. I was just a simple soldier, not on his level at all. But he was certainly crafty enough, and he knew what awaited him when he returned to the Soviet Union," unlike two Red Army soldiers who defected in Afghanistan and later returned to the U.S.S.R.

British newspapers reported recently that the two soldiers had been executed. "They were only simple guys," Movchan said. "They didn't realize what they were doing."

Movchan was reluctant to talk about his family in the Ukraine. He and his two brothers grew up in a rural town near Zhitomir, a provincial city west of the Ukrainian capital of Kiev. Of medium height, with a small mustache, hazel eyes and a soft voice, he was drafted into the army at 18 and sent to Afghanistan in the fall of 1982 as a member of a grenade-launching unit.

He and his fellow soldiers had been told that they would help save the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan from U.S., Pakistani and Chinese invaders. The invaders turned out to be the Soviets.

Morale among the troops was low; there was drug abuse, drunkenness, harsh discipline. There were numerous bloody clashes with Moslem mujaheddin freedom fighters.

Movchan said he was sickened by the sight of Soviet soldiers shooting Afghan civilians in reprisal for guerrilla attacks, and he determined to fulfill a childhood dream of escaping the Soviet Union. He stole away from his unit, was taken in by the guerrillas and, after months of uncertainty, made his way to the United States in July 1984.

Originally aided by Freedom House in New York City, Movchan is a legal resident alien, awaiting permanent citizenship. He has traveled widely in the country on behalf of the Afghan resistance movement and Ukrainian human rights activists jailed or in exile in the Soviet Union.

"I've seen a little of America, and I understand a little more about the country," Movchan said in an interview during a visit here sponsored by several Ukrainian-American organizations. There are more than 50,000 Chicago-area residents of Ukrainian descent, one of the largest Ukrainian communities outside the U.S.S.R.

"There is the freedom here of a person to make a life for himself. Americans are fortunate—they can do what they want, read what they want. While I still don't yet know exactly where my life will go, I feel like an American."

Movchan is enrolled in an adult education course to improve his rudimentary English. Meanwhile, for recreation, he reads Pravda, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party. And his mind dwells on the new life stretching ahead: "I'm not able to live in my own country, and so I must learn to swim here."

Of all the places he has seen in his travels, from Disneyland to the Grand Canyon, he prefers New York City. This may have something to do with the swift and unexpected course of his own life.

"People there are temperamental. Everyone rushes all the time. This is as it should be, because life is short, and you must run."